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Terrorist says orders come from Arafat

By Matthew Kalman, USA TODAY

TULKARM, West Bank — A leader of the largest Palestinian terrorist group spearheading suicide bombings and other attacks against Israel says he is following the orders of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. "Our group is an integral part of Fatah," says Maslama Thabet, 33, a leader of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade. Fatah, headed by Arafat, is the largest group in the Palestinian Authority, the government of the autonomous Palestinian territories. Thabet spoke from the Tulkarm refugee camp, where he was holed up with about 300 of his heavily armed followers as hundreds of Israeli soldiers swept through the town. Over the past two weeks, Israel has launched massive incursions into Palestinian towns and refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza in search of terrorists.



By Abdelhak Senna, AFP
A member of the Palestinian Al-Aqsa Brigade shows his explosives belt Friday in Bethlehem.

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"The truth is, we are Fatah itself, but we don't operate under the name of Fatah," he said in a recent interview. "We are the armed wing of the organization. We receive our instructions from Fatah. Our commander is Yasser Arafat himself."

Spokesmen for Arafat give differing responses when asked about his ties to Thabet and the brigade. Nabil Abu Rudeineh, Arafat's chief spokesman, says he has never heard of Thabet. "The president has nothing to do with these things, he has nothing to say about this issue," Rudeineh says.

But Mohammed Odwan, Arafat's foreign media spokesman, confirms that the brigade is "loyal to President Arafat."

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"They are working for the interests of the Palestinian people," Odwan says. "They are fighting because they think these kind of operations — and I agree — will push forward their independence and their dream of freedom."

Israeli security officials concede Arafat is not involved in directing the on-the-ground operations of militant groups, but they say his regular calls for holy war against Israel's occupation have been taken up as a directive by the extremists.

In a televised address Saturday, as Palestinian terrorists launched suicide attacks in Netanya and Jerusalem, Arafat urged Palestinians to "sacrifice themselves as martyrs in jihad (holy war) for Palestine."

"When Arafat stands in front of a crowd and calls for millions of martyrs to march on Jerusalem and holy war against Israel, he is giving a clear directive to his followers," says Reserve Col. Eran Lerman, former head of research for Israeli Military Intelligence and now the Jerusalem director of the American Jewish Committees. "Marwan Barghouti (secretary-general of Fatah in the West Bank) and the local leaders below him take that directive and transform it into actions. ... Arafat does not personally approve individual operations, but he provides the money for Barghouti's terrorism."

Barghouti, who often is on the guest list at dinners with Arafat in the Palestinian leader's compound in Ramallah, confirmed last week that one of his lieutenants who was killed in an Israeli assassination was a member of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade.

The link between the brigade and Arafat signals a turning point in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It means the Palestinian leadership has openly allied itself with a terrorist group. Palestinian officials openly say dealing in death, not diplomacy, is the only viable way to achieve their end: an independent Palestinian state.

As the Palestinians have ramped up their attacks on Israeli targets, Israel has escalated its response. The result has been some of the worst violence the region has seen in decades. More than 200 people have died — 163 Palestinians and 59 Israelis — since the beginning of March. More than 1,500 people have been killed in the past 17 months, more than 1,000 of them Palestinians. Israel's incursions into Palestinian territory reached a new level this week: 20,000 troops were deployed, and they searched house-to-house for terrorists and weapons. It has been the biggest Israeli military operation since its invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

The emergence of a radical young branch of Arafat's Fatah faction comes as no surprise to Mahmoud Muhareb, a Palestinian professor of political science at Al-Quds University in Jerusalem. "They are under siege, under blockade and almost at the edge of starvation," he says. "When you dehumanize the life of human beings, they end up feeling their life is not worthy. Five years ago, you might find one suicide bomber in an entire city. Today, it is different. There are many, because they feel there is no meaning to their lives."

Palestinian Authority officials say most members of the brigade receive salaries from Arafat's Palestinian Authority. For example, the leader of the brigade in Nablus, Nasser Awes, is a salaried officer in the Palestinian National Security Force, one of 14 armed police and security services that report to Arafat. In the past two weeks, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade has claimed responsibility for attacks including:

- A suicide bombing March 2 in Jerusalem that killed 10 Israelis and injured 44.
- A sniper ambush on a West Bank checkpoint on March 3 that killed 10 Israelis and wounded four.
- The shooting attack on a seaside hotel late Saturday in Netanya, north of Tel Aviv, that killed two Israelis and injured dozens.

- An ambush in northern Israel on Tuesday in which gunmen wearing Israeli army uniforms killed six Israelis before soldiers shot two of the attackers dead.

Israeli police say they thwarted a string of other planned attacks by the group in recent weeks.

The brigade, unknown until a year ago, has become the largest armed Palestinian group operating in the West Bank, Gaza and Israel. Unlike two other major Palestinian militant groups, the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the brigade is secular. The group grew out of the Fatah youth movement known as the Tanzim. Under the 1993 Oslo peace accords that stated only Palestinian security services may bear arms, Tanzim is an illegal militia of about 10,000 armed young men headed by Barghouti.

As the terrorist wing of Arafat's Fatah faction, the brigade has the support of the largest political and military faction in the Palestinian Authority. Hussein A-Sheikh, a Fatah political leader in the West Bank, seems insulted when asked whether the brigade is under Arafat's control. "Of course, there is control," he snaps. "What do you think? That we are just a bunch of gangs?"

The Israeli army says Fatah, fueled by the brigade's lethal activities, has surpassed Hamas in Israeli fatalities. Hamas killed 100 Israelis in 2001 and Fatah killed 45, the army says, but since the start of 2002, Fatah has killed 57 Israelis while Hamas has killed 27. The brigade also introduced a lethal twist to its attacks: female suicide bombers. Wafa Idris killed an elderly man and wounded 50 people in a suicide attack Jan. 27 in Jerusalem. A woman blew herself up at a West Bank army checkpoint on Feb. 27, injuring two soldiers.

Thabet, who commands the brigade in Tulkarm, attained notoriety a year ago when, with his friend Raed Karmi, he kidnapped and executed two Israeli restaurateurs who had stopped in Tulkarm for lunch. Karmi, founder of the brigade in Tulkarm, died in an explosion in January in a suspected Israeli assassination. Palestinian security forces arrested Thabet last year. He was released, as were dozens of other suspected terrorists.

"Our struggle is against the Israeli occupation," Thabet said. "We are prepared to fight to the last fighter against (Israeli Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon and his war machine. ... Israel must pay a heavy price for the atrocities and massacres which they are perpetrating on a daily basis against the Palestinian people."

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